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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PJD'S OTHMANI ON PARTY SPLIT, WESTERN SAHARA, 2007
ELECTIONS AND FIRST-EVER VISIT TO U.S.

Classified By: Pol/C Timothy Lenderking for reasons 1.4 (B)(D).

1. (C) Summary: During a January 6 meeting with Emboffs, Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) Secretary General Saad Eddin Othmani Othmani downplayed the reported split within the PJD describing it as a handful of individuals the party wanted to get rid of. He highlighted the party's activism on the Western Sahara detailing a conference the PJD will host in March to explore various autonomy options, and focused on the 2007 elections, for which the key element will be the passage of a new electoral code to bring it into line with the political party law. Emboffs also discussed with Othmani the possibility of an international visitor leadership program (IVLP). Othmani has never travelled to the U.S., but was selected by the Embassy IVLP committee to participate in the program. End summary.

Party Split: No Effect on the PJD

2. (SBU) Continuing dialogue with Moroccan Islamists, Poloff and PAS officers met January 6 with Islamist PJD Secretary General Saad Eddin Othmani. Othmani dismissed the importance of what has been termed in the press as a "split" within the PJD, with the establishment of new Islamist party El Yaqadha Wal Fadhila (Renaissance and Virtue Party). Othmani said that only two individuals (including Mohamed El Khaldi from the eastern Moroccan city of Oujda) had recently left the PJD to establish the new party and that previously only four to five PJD members had left. These people were already on the "margins" of the party and therefore their departure would have "no effect" on the PJD. Indeed, according to Othmani, the party was glad to be rid of these elements and this was the best possible outcome. While they posed "no competition" to the PJD, competition within the political context is a good thing, emphasized Othmani.

Western Sahara: PJD Ready to Play a Role

3. (SBU) The PJD plans to convene a conference on the Western Sahara in Rabat at the beginning of March. This conference, originally scheduled to be held in early January, had been postponed in order to invite experts from countries which have had autonomy-sharing experiences, such as Spain, Germany and Belgium, according to Othmani. While the King had recently called for increased political party participation in the determination of the Western Sahara, Othmani said his party had been active on this issue for at least the past year. Pulling out a speech he had given in March 2005 on the Sahara, Othmani emphasized that the PJD believed that a new division of the country into six or seven regions (vice the current 16), each with its own regional government to govern local affairs, including for the Sahara region, would facilitate autonomy for the Western Sahara. The prerogatives given to these newly formed regions should be broadly expanded. Of course, this would require a constitutional amendment. This issue was widely discussed at the recent PJD general secretariat meeting held December 31-January 1 and a more detailed proposal would be presented at the March conference.

2007 Elections: PJD Primed for Participation

4. (SBU) Following parliament's passage of the political party law in December 2005, Othmani said there was a rush to establish more political parties, creating the opposite effect of what had been expected. These four or five parties were trying to register themselves before the party law becomes official by being registered in the Official Bulletin. In general, political parties in Morocco are the "weakest point" of the democratic system in Morocco and need development, according to Othmani. The new party law should serve to increase representation, internal democracy and transparency in such issues as decision-making and party finances, all causes the PJD supports.

5. (SBU) While passage of the political party law was important, according to Othmani, the most critical element to ensure fair elections in 2007 will be electoral code reform. A requirement to receive a minimum of five percent of the national vote to be represented in Parliament must be instituted in order to rationalize the system and produce a more "coherent" outcome. There are currently 17 or 18 parties represented in Parliament. If the five percent rule

in the electoral code was adopted, there would only be 7 or 8 parties represented in the lower house. The disappearance of ten political parties would not be a big loss for Morocco, according to Othmani. However, the state needs the "political courage" to make these major political decisions. The King had said that this law should be voted on a year before the 2007 elections, so it "should probably" be done, according to Othmani. He hoped, however, that the government was "up to the task." The PJD had prepared a position paper which they would present soon to the government on the issue.

16. (SBU) Gearing up for the 2007 elections, the PJD is currently planning to undertake a caravan in five different regions, not yet determined, to begin campaigning. Indeed, meeting Moroccans resident in the U.S., said Othmani, will be important due to the fact that they will likely be eligible to vote in the 2007 elections and will need to be motivated to do so. Othmani offered that it was possible that the government would ask the PJD to join its ranks following the upcoming elections. When asked whether he was ready to serve as Prime Minister should his party join the government, Othmani grinned and said, "one is never ready enough."

Visit to the U.S. A First for PJD Leader

17. (SBU) Embosfs raised with Othmani his possible participation in an IV program. As Othmani was unable to commit to a full three-week program and had already been invited to the U.S. by the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) in early May, PAS pledged to research the possibility of a Voluntary Visitor program for Othmani directly following the CSID conference. Editor-in-Chief of PJD-affiliated Arabic daily Al-Tajdid and Humphrey Fellow currently in Washington Mustafa Khalfi had made numerous recommendations for a program for the PJD SYG. Based on Khalfi's advice, Othmani said he wished to meet politicians, academics and Moroccans resident in the U.S., particularly in New York, Boston and Washington. In meeting with Arab-American and Islamic American groups in the U.S., Othmani said that he would be happy to speak on a topic such as "Challenges of Reform and Development in Morocco."

18. (SBU) While Othmani has never been to the U.S., he said he had traveled extensively within the past month, visiting Belgium, Italy, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The PJD plans to convene a conference on U.S.-Arab relations and American lobbying at the end of March, to which several American experts and the Embassy would be invited.

Comment

19. (C) Once again, the PJD is ahead of the curve vis-a-vis most other political parties when it comes to the 2007 elections -- beginning their campaigning early (including targeting the Moroccans abroad). While Othmani declined to respond directly as to whether he is ready to become Prime Minister, the fact that he raised the possibility that his party would be asked to join the government in 2007 seems to suggest that he is becoming more and more comfortable with this eventuality. Conventional wisdom indicates that if the PJD is allowed to fully compete throughout the country, they could walk away with the elections. If indeed Othmani becomes PM, the timing of a visitor program for him to the U.S. couldn't be better. End comment.

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